

Senator Charles (Chuck) Grassley and his son, Robin, load the soybean drill to finish planting in mid-May at their Iowa grain farm.

stacked Grassley's mail on the dining room table. Grassley sits in the living room, sharing his thoughts on farming, agriculture and politics, at times leaning forward, gesturing energetically.

"I'm kind of the hired man for Robin," Grassley explains. "The first few weekends in May, I try to be available to help him on the farm." He also helps with harvest in the fall.

Although Grassley is home about 40 weekends a year, he has turned over more and more management decisions to Robin, who is 40.

The Senate's only active farmer, Grassley farms 700 acres of corn and soybeans with his son on a 50/50 share basis, splitting half of the seed and chemical costs and half of the income.

Robin Grassley farms another 700 acres on his own. He is buying about 500 and renting another 200.

"You didn't know this, but we're back in the pig business," Robin announces after joining his dad in the living room. Robin's son, Pat, a junior in high school, started a farming enterprise this spring by buying 125 feeder pigs with his dad. "It's something to do and give him some responsibility."

Called away from the land

It's clear that Grassley loves his time on the farm. "This is his getaway," Robin explains.

But it's also clear from talking to the elder Grassley only a few minutes, that his first calling is politics. His mother, Ruth, was a rural school teacher and his father, Louis, a World War I veteran who bought his first farm in 1927. The Grassleys were frugal, conservative Baptists who didn't drink and who refused to participate in New Deal farm programs.

Charles Grassley, the middle of five children, grew up on a diet of dinner table discussions of politics. As early as the fifth grade, he was telling his teachers he was going into politics. He got a master's degree in political science and was elected to the Iowa House of Representatives at age 25.

That was in 1958. He went on to the U.S. House of Representatives in



Photographs: John Holtorf

Gaining strength at home port

Veteran U.S. senator Charles Grassley works at his farm almost every weekend

By Dan Looker
Business Editor

It is early April on a Saturday so windy that you can barely stand. Patches of snow are still melting in the ditches in northern Iowa. It's too early to plant corn. But Chuck Grassley has chores planned for his farmstead near New Hartford. He'll fence hungry rabbits away from his tulips and fill bird feeders. Later, he'll return on more weekends, so that by May 19, he and his son, Robin, will finish planting, with the older partner

expertly guiding a soybean drill.

You wouldn't guess that this is home for a powerful U.S. senator. Until Democrats took over the Senate in May, Grassley ran the Finance Committee for four months this year, long enough to give President George W. Bush one clear victory, the biggest federal tax cut in a generation.

A typical Iowa farm

Here, there's no pretense. A battered pickup truck and an aging conversion van are parked in front of a three-bedroom ranch house. Inside, Robin has

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1974 and the U.S. Senate in 1980.

Grassley has been a fiscal and moral conservative. In the Iowa legislature he fought legalizing the sale of liquor by the drink. In Washington he took on the Reagan administration to cut military spending. Even though he was swept into the Senate with help from the religious New Right, Grassley is no ideologue. He's an independent thinker and has worked with liberal senators, including Ted Kennedy, on issues affecting the elderly.

In 1991 he was one of only two Republicans to vote against the Gulf War. "That was the most difficult one," Grassley recalls. "I saw parents, wives and children crying when their loved ones went off," he adds. He thought it was wrong to send Americans to fight for oil and "money, macho and monarchy" as he told a reporter at the time.

A populist and optimist

On farm issues, Grassley is almost a Prairie Populist. He was the only Republican to vote for Democratic Senator Paul Wellstone's moratorium on agribusiness mergers, which failed.

When asked if vertical integration is a threat to family farms, he replies, "Absolutely. It's a threat from the standpoint that farmers who don't join in cooperatives don't have the marketing muscle that big integrators will have." He adds that integration alone isn't the biggest threat. "I guess what bothers me the most is the lack of



Grassley makes a point about farm policy. He helped get higher spending for farm programs.

competition farmers have in inputs and the lack of competition between processors. The big international corporations that are buying grain and processing food don't show the proper respect for the family farmer."

Yet Grassley doesn't see family farms disappearing. They're just getting bigger. "It's still family labor, management and capital. In Iowa, at least for crop production, that's still 95% of our arrangements," he says.

In 1960 when Grassley's father died, he rented 80 acres from his mother. "I signed a note to my mother to take the machinery from the sale, and I had a note at the bank and off-farm income (working at a factory in Waterloo)," he recalls. He also had \$3,000 every other year from the Iowa legislature.

In 1980 when Robin started farming, his family, too, had family help, off-farm income, and bank loans. The cycle may start again with grandson Pat. And Grassley will fight in the Senate to keep that cycle going. **SE**



Three generations of Grassley farmers include (left to right) grandson Pat, Senator Chuck Grassley, and son, Robin.

Book chronicles successful career

When Chuck Grassley started his political career in the Iowa House in 1958, he farmed, had a job, and commuted to the capital, Des Moines, by chipping in for gasoline and riding with another legislator. Grassley had no car in Des Moines. When he went to Washington, he shared an apartment with a staffer.

These accounts show that Grassley is as frugal in his personal

life as he expects the government to be.

These insightful stories are part of a fascinating 1995 book about his career. *Grassley: Senator from Iowa* by journalist Eric Woolson is published by Mid-Prairie Books (\$25).

The book may be available at your public library. It can be ordered at bookstores or through Internet book Web sites. ■

Learn more

A key to Grassley's longevity in politics is his closeness to voters. He visits each of Iowa's 99 counties at least once a year. Here are ways to find his positions on issues or contact him: Senator Charles Grassley
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